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“The way things get done around here...”

Exploring spatial biographies, social policy and governance in the North East of England

Dr Jon Warren

Abstract

Purpose

This article argues that the application of social policy in the North East of England is often characterized by tension and conflict. The agencies and professionals charged with implementation of Westminster driven policies constantly seek to deploy their knowledge of local conditions in order to make them both practical and palatable.

Design/methodology/approach

This article examines the region via established literature from history, geography, sociology and social policy. The article gives illustrations via empirical work which has evaluated initiatives to improve the health of long term health related benefit recipients and to sustain individuals in employment in the region.

Findings

Central to the article’s argument is the notion of “biographies of place” The core of this idea is that places have biographies in the same way as individuals and possess specific identities. These biographies have been shaped by the intersections between environment, history, culture and economic and social policy. The article identifies the region’s economic development, subsequent decline and the alliance of Labour politics and industrial employers around a common consensus that sought economic prosperity and social progress via a vision of “modernization” as a key component of this biography.

Originality/Value

The article argues that an appreciation of these spatial biographies can result in innovative and more effective social policy interventions with the potential to address issues that affect entire localities.

Introduction

In 2015 I was invited to contribute to a local radio roundtable discussion about the impact of the UK government spending cuts and welfare reforms upon Stockton-on-Tees in the North East of England. The town suffers from high levels of economic and health inequality. Male life expectancy inequality is the highest in England with those in the most deprived areas living on average 17 years less than those in the least deprived parts of town. A prominent member of the Labour controlled council was also appearing as was a senior member of the Conservative opposition. During the discussion I was struck by how much these local politicians had in common, and how little attention they paid to the “party line”. Both came from the local area and broadly agreed on the problems the area faced; they also agreed, as they later told me, how their local priorities often differed to the national agenda. Consequently, it seemed that local government in the area were largely concerned with attempting to adapt national policies to local needs and endeavouring to mitigate any potential negative consequences. In the areas of the UK with devolved government -Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland variation due to local needs is possible. But the English regions lost all of the governmental bodies which were tasked with dealing with regional issues when the Coalition government abolished them in 2010. So for England this is an ongoing and unresolved issue.

This article will argue that the application of social policy in the North East is often characterised by tension and conflict. The agencies and professionals charged with the implementation of Westminster driven policies constantly seek to deploy their knowledge of local conditions in order to make them both practical and palatable. This is knowledge which could, and should be used to inform and shape policies which are more appropriate to those conditions. Central to article’s argument is the notion of “biographies of place” (Warren 2011, Warren and Garthwaite 2014(a)). The core of this idea is that places have biographies in the same way as individuals do, and that they possess specific identities. These biographies have been shaped by the intersections between environment, history, politics, culture, and economic and social policy. Recognising and appreciating these spatial biographies has the potential to result in innovative more effective and better social policy interventions which have the potential to address issues that affect localities. Such a shift would, of course, have consequences for the dynamics of governance.

This article is located within wider debates about the nature of post-industrial societies, the consequences of globalisation, and its impact upon regional economies. These macro level issues manifest themselves within the lives of individuals trying to make sense of their lived experiences of changing local labour markets and a changing welfare system which have been a central part of ongoing neoliberal reforms in the wake of the global financial crisis. Whilst focussed on the North East of England, this article speaks to many of the themes which this journal has covered in recent years, and again highlights the intimate connection between the global and the regional.

A long way from London

The North East of England is a long way from London both physically and culturally. In many ways, it is different to much of what is now referred to as “the North”. The North East encompasses Teesside, Wearside, Tyneside, Cleveland, County Durham and

Northumberland. Its identity and specific character can be argued to have been forged during the industrial revolution. The North East can make a good claim to being the world's very first industrial region. In the 19th century a complex of industries which Byrne (2002) has termed "carboniferous capitalism" emerged. The combination of the regions' geology, geography and the emergence of new technologies and techniques in mining, steelmaking, engineering and shipbuilding meant that the North East was truly an industrial powerhouse. The legacy of the region's achievements wealth and industrial might can be argued to be a major strength and also a source of contemporary troubles.

Coal, steel and shipbuilding reached their peak early in the 20th century just prior to the First World War. Ever since, the region has been subject to a long decline, its economic power and influence eroding decade by decade, year by year. The long decline enjoyed several moments of respite; during World War II the region's industries which had been decimated by the depression of the 1930s enjoyed a sudden and dramatic renaissance with the outbreak of the Second World War. Industries such as chemicals were established. ICI Teesside was established in the 1920's and grew dramatically due to the demand for munitions and synthetic oil between 1939 and 1945. In the post war era of consensus politics which attempted to maintain "full employment" and took coal, steel and shipbuilding into state control meant that the region's industrial decline was actively managed, and planned until the 1980's.

The neo-liberal free market economics of the Thatcher administrations in the 1980's and all subsequent governments since unleashed a shock wave of de-industrialisation across the UK the North East was hit particularly hard by this. For example, Consett steel works closed in 1980, and by 1990 Sunderland, on Wearside which had once been able to claim the title of the "the biggest shipbuilding town in the world" had no remaining shipyards left open. By the mid 1990's only one deep coal mine remained in the region, it subsequently closed in 2010 long after all the others.

Recently, iron and steel making in the region has been hit by the closure of the Redcar blast furnace, once one of the nationalised British Steel's plants. This facility, the second largest blast furnace in Europe, had struggled since privatisation under Corus Steel, then Tata the Indian industrial conglomerate before being "saved" in 2011 by Thailand's SSI; who finally put the plant into liquidation in 2015. This process of industrial decline has been evident for a century and been a source of great frustration for national, regional and local government. Therefore, it is essential to understand the broad economic context if we are to make sense of the region's issues and social problems, many of which are linked to this industrial decline and also the proposed solutions, patterns and practices of governance which happen in the region.

The region's collective past still shapes its future and influences the ways in which that future is conceived and envisioned. Industries change; develop; adapt and sometimes disappear altogether; however, it is clear that the ways of life; attitudes; practices and expectations that they helped to establish do not. They are much more resilient and remain in shape of "industrial structures of feeling" (Williams 1973). For good or ill they persist and this persistence is significant. Being "postindustrial" is not just a matter of economic change; it is one of deep social and cultural transformation, and this is a process which happens much more slowly. The ongoing transition and tensions between what Williams termed the "residual" and "emergent" cultures are evident in the North East and the practice of policy and governance. The closure of Redcar Steel works and the campaign to save it illustrate this in vivid terms. This was not just the closure of a workplace; it was seen in much bigger terms, with the local press spoke declaring it signified "170 years of history under threat" (The Teesside Gazette 29/09/2015).

Tom Blenkinsop MP argued:

"It's the heart of our local economy, but more than that it's our culture and tradition. It's the very identity of where we come from, the pride we take in ourselves and our parents and grandparents before us."

(Hansard 16/09/2015)

These reactions show that in an increasingly post-industrial region, where many of the industries that built it have faded from view or disappeared altogether, the industrial past still matters and has the power to evoke powerful emotions. This is something my research explores in greater depth in my forthcoming book, *"Industrial Teesside, lives and legacies"*.

Crucially, the closure of the plant was not seen as inevitable or down to a slump in the price of steel, it was seen as the fault of the government, a remote government based in London a long way from the region. A government which neither cares for the region nor understands it. Speaking on BBC News, Anna Turnley MP for Redcar stated:

"I cannot believe the government has allowed 170 years of steelmaking to fade away with no fight, no determination and no understanding of what this means to our area, to people's livelihoods and to the British economy."

Biographies of place

From 2009 until 2012 I spent much of my working life evaluating health initiatives commissioned by the NHS within the region. It appeared to me as a relative newcomer to the world of public health that many of those involved with it were asking some interesting questions. For example, why do some localities have much higher incidence of impairment and chronic illness than others? Why do some policy initiatives and health interventions work in some areas and make little impact elsewhere? However, as a social scientist I was surprised where they were looking for the answers, particularly in the way in which they focused on individuals and their behaviour, i.e. seeing smoking, drinking alcohol and a poor diet as a cause rather than a symptom or reaction to something deeper rooted in the communities these individuals were part of. It seemed that what was being sought was a quick fix, a "magic bullet". Any discussion of the places they lived was at worst absent, and at best highly superficial. Multiple geographical analyses of the labour market, health and social deprivation in the UK show us that location is highly significant and that major inequalities are evident. As a result I began to consider and question the way in which public health researchers and geographers had tended to focus on composition or contextual effects (Macintyre *et al.*, 2002) instead of seeking a more integrated understanding of spaces and places.

Subsequently, Kayleigh Garthwaite and I have argued that there is a need to understand places as possessing specific identities with intersections between environment, history, and culture: which can be understood as a 'biography of place' (Warren 2011, Warren and Garthwaite 2014a). The core of this idea is that places have biographies in the same way as individuals. Furthermore, the intersection of individual and spatial biographies is particularly significant for understanding the structure and impact of disadvantage and social exclusion. Additionally, the relationships between collective and individual biographies, the place in which they live and the potential individuals have to improve their personal situation and overcome the barriers within those spaces must also be considered.

Place is commonly taken for granted and often subsumed by the needs of policy makers, with place becoming 'whatever policy says it is'. Because of this, there is a

need to re-imagine place in order to provide a viable counter narrative to the dominant one which sees place as little more than an administrative category. It can be argued that this in turn has led to a failure to challenge the “one policy fits all” approach which national governments have pursued in Britain since the early 20th Century. In order to begin this process we can usefully draw on what Wright Mills (1959) termed the ‘*Sociological Imagination*’. Wright Mills (1959:4) asserts that:

“no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey”

Mills also declared that ‘neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both’ (1959:5). This statement of how the history of society shapes the lives of individuals is applicable not only to whole societies but to communities, and in order to fully comprehend an issue such as the health of those who live in a place, we need to understand that place; not only the history but the narratives of work, locality, culture and being that exist within it. It is these parts which can be said to constitute a ‘biography of place’. Mills also urged us to study the critical points where biography and history intersect and the junctures where private troubles become public issues. Mills made this point with his discussion of unemployment.

To understand unemployment in a place such as Easington in County Durham, space is highly significant as its labour market was dominated by a declining industry (coal mining) within a regional context of industrial decline for most of the twentieth century. Without an account of place the dynamics between personal troubles and public issues any explanation is rendered unintelligible. It is important to point out that a place’s biography is more than just the sum of these parts; neither is it a ‘one way street’. The action of individuals also shapes the social structures they inhabit:

“By the fact of his living he contributes, however minutely to the shaping of society and to the course of its history, even as he is made by society and its historical push and shove”

(Wright Mills, 1959; 6).

In order to explain the present in a locality and the lives of those who reside there, it is necessary to understand the area’s past as well as their individual and collective experience. It is also crucial to recognise that the way in which a place has been conceptualised and administered are part of this process as this, too, contributes to any biography of a place. My argument seeks to show that these processes are only part of a wider story which needs to be understood. Biographies of place become embedded over time and are revealed and manifested in individual life stories.

It would appear to be self-evident that the underlying circumstances and characteristics of a place need to be considered before potential solutions are offered; this may be an area where something could be learnt from medical practice. Medicine routinely takes patient histories in order to diagnose problems and prescribe remedies. Within medicine, it is accepted that whilst there may be an accepted course of treatment for a condition, the way in which it is applied to individuals will vary, according to their present condition, prior experiences and behaviours. If a similar approach was applied to policy it is place that provides these answers allowing a convincing “case history” to be established. Such an approach would allow a path to be trodden between the ‘one size fits all’ approach which discounts difference, and a ‘complexity’ approach which see the problems of each place as being a unique and atomised ‘case in itself’. Instead, an intervention which draws upon best practice in the policy field but is equally aware of the biography of the place within which an intervention is to be deployed

becomes possible. In summary the idea of a 'biography of place' in order to construct a holistic account of what it is like to live in a particular area with a particular context, is essential. Otherwise, contextual and compositional arguments, whilst to a degree helpful, can be argued to be essentially attempting to account for a places' deviation from an idealised imagined norm. By considering each place as unique and then asking what it may have in common with other places. For example, ill health related worklessness is often the product of a complex interaction of several factors: the environment, the social, the economic and also individual lifestyles: the compositional, the contextual, and beyond. In other words, we need to pay attention to the elements which make up an area's history and culture.

In the North East of England, the basis of the region's biography is primarily geological. As mentioned above the region's plentiful deposits of coal and iron ore allowed it, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century to become one of the world's first industrial regions. The region also combined geological resources and technical innovation, it was here that modern railways and the locomotives to move coal and ore were invented. Those resources allowed iron and steel production to flourish which in turn was used to build ships, ships which were filled with coal to export and which returned with imported resources such as Baltic timber. Being at the forefront of the industrial revolution gave the region a unique place in history, and also allowed it to accumulate material, technical and human capital.

However, the advantages of being one of the first places to industrialize began to disappear as other regions of the world industrialized and the North East lost its unique position. The end of steel making at Redcar in 2015 can be argued to be the end of this process. The region's geology has in recent years been seen as having little part in its future; instead, the wider industrial infrastructure, technical skills and an available workforce of the region have been promoted in an attempt to attract inward investment. This has helped to establish the automotive industry in the region since the mid 1980's with Nissan's plant at Washington. However, when competing for inward investment the region is not unique, as part of my research into the legacy of the area's industrial past I spoke one of the team at the Local Enterprise Partnership they told me.

"It's my job to try and get people to invest in the area , our main point is the port and our closeness to Europe. But the problem is there are plenty of other old industrial cities with ports trying to do the same"

Yet the regions geology may yet prove to be a future resource with huge reserves of shale gas and the potential for coal to be exploited once again by "gasification" technology. Place has not only obvious spatial dimensions, but temporal dimensions too.

The examination of spatial biographies can enhance the understanding places and the issues they face from a multiplicity of angles and allow the spotlight to fall upon hitherto neglected areas. But anyone attempting analysis of this sort is still faced with a difficult question. That question is one of priority, i.e. which narratives have shaped the region to the greatest extent? Furthermore which of them prove the most useful in explaining the path by which the present has been reached? In other words is there a dominant explanation which can be privileged above others and can its "genealogy" be traced?

Government and Governance in the North East

There is a sense that the North East is as different to London and the South East of England as Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. For many years the region was seen

as an ideal candidate for elected regional self-government, largely because of its strong identity and particular economic challenges. However, plans for an elected regional assembly were rejected in 2004 when a referendum into the issue was held. In fact the rejection was so emphatic that it convinced the then Secretary of State for Local Government John Prescott to abandon plans for devolution to the English regions. But throughout the New Labour years the region had had several unelected regional bodies established in the shape of Government Office North East and One North East. This ended when the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition came to power in 2010 the regional bodies across England were speedily closed and abolished in the name of austerity and savings. Five years on regional devolution was being offered to Northern Cities such as Manchester and Sheffield as part of Chancellor George Osborne's "Northern Powerhouse" project, with Greater Manchester effectively serving as a pilot area. Whether the region might benefit from any such initiatives is currently unclear. For example, although many local authorities will welcome the chance keep local business rates, a measure announced by Osborne in early 2016 however the loss of rate support grant may mean for many that there is net loss. Subsequently matters have been further complicated by Osborne's departure from the Government in the wake of the EU referendum result. The devolution agenda is still alive but has lost its most powerful backer within government.

It can be argued that the connections between business and governance in the North East are longstanding, very strong but also potentially unhelpful. Bevir's ideas on governance are particularly helpful when considering the relationship between business and governance as it allows the questions to be asked about structures and policies and how the social actors involved have influenced, prioritised and chosen to implement policy:

" refers to all processes of governing whether undertaken by a government market or network whether over a family or tribe or corporation or territory, and whether by laws, norms, powers or language. Governance is a boarder term than government because it Governance is a broader term than government because it focuses not only on the state and its institutions but also on the creation of rule and order in social practices." (Bevir 2013:13)

Beynon et al (1994) in their study of Teesside, argue that as the conurbation was rural and undeveloped prior to the coming of industry in the mid nineteenth century it was effectively the industrial elite which formed and shaped the civic institutions and culture of the area. Unlike other areas in the region there was no pre-existing ruling elite which had to be usurped or integrated with.

In the North-East it can be argued that the reverse often happened, with the old aristocracy e.g. the Duke of Northumberland and Lord Londonderry became part of the new industrial elite by making a transition from being primarily landowners to coal owners. During the heyday of the North East's industrial economy, this was not a problem. However the region's long industrial decline and the issues which have arisen due to it such as the oversupply of semiskilled and unskilled labour have proved very difficult to overcome. Beatty and Fothergill (2005) and Beatty Fothergill and Powell (2007).

Beynon et al (1994) argue that until the 1970's essentially the same industrial and civic elite was in charge at a local level as had been since 19th century, but from the 1940's onwards this group had been joined by a strong form of local Labourism which superficially appeared to have a different agenda. In fact, both groups shared a common agenda which prioritised jobs and industry in the area in the interests of both

capital and labour. They also developed a way of doing business together; it was this way of “getting along” in order to “get things done”. In fact it was this which I had witnessed in my encounter with the two Stockton-on-Tees local politicians.

A good illustration of this alliance action is the way in which social housing policy was pursued in the early post war period when ICI was developing the Wilton chemical plant on Teesside. The plant brought thousands of jobs to the Eston area, but housing was in short supply. ICI did not wish to build company housing so it came up with a mutually beneficial agreement with Eston Council as the following letter illustrates:

“We appreciate that the fact that your Council are not permitted to enter into a binding agreement to let these homes to our employees, and that the arrangements in this connection must therefore rest on the basis of a ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ between the Council and the Company. If you will let me know when the first of the houses are nearing completion I will arrange to supply you with a list of our employees in the order of priority in which would like the tenancies allocating”

(Gofton of ICI to Potter of Eston council in Beynon et al 1994)

This local “corporatism” can be argued to have been a useful defensive strategy to help manage industrial decline. As Beynon et al further point out, on Teesside for most of the 20th century there was no serious conflict with national policies and local priorities, nor was there any serious challenge to a dominant narrative of modernisation.

“Modernisation”

“Modernisation (meaning investment and technological change in, and the continued prioritisation of, a few industries plus vague promises about diversification) was nevertheless (by and large) accepted because it was accompanied by more or less full employment overmuch (though by no means all) of Teesside. But it was also accepted that there was little else on offer. There were few effective and concrete alternative propositions from Labour and its representatives because most of them had been incorporated into a program inspired by capital’s requirements for profitable production. The character of the place continued to be decisively shaped by the requirements of chemicals and steel producers.” (Beynon et al 1994 :72)

It can be argued that this narrative of “modernisation” was evident across the whole of the region, although of course the industries varied. As such the pre-war national level initiatives North East development board (1935) or post war large scale infrastructure projects such the 1963 Hailsham programme for the North-East could be seen as part of the project of modernisation. Economic initiatives such as the 1965 “National Plan” and the 1968 Geddes report which aimed to streamline and restructure the nation’s shipbuilding capacity could also be seen as part of this broad umbrella; as could political changes such as the restructuring of local government which took place in 1973. Most of these measures were in line with the type of economic planning that the Labour movement had long advocated, even if they were enacted by Conservative governments such as the Hailsham plan for the North East although as Beynon et al (1994) point out most of the measures had in fact been proposed by local authorities for some time and this was in no way a plan imposed on the region by national government.

This project of modernisation effectively lost its national backing in from the 1980's onwards due to the neo-liberal abandonment of economic planning in favour of what was then termed "free market" economics. As Hudson (2013) has argued, the national economic narrative was no longer about retaining or diversifying the North East's industrial capacity, as it had been in previous decades it was about reducing it. Local structures though arguably attempted to keep the "modernisation" project alive by defending old industries and welcoming new opportunities. There have been notable successes such as car manufacturer Nissan in establishing a highly productive plant in Washington near Sunderland. Automotive manufacture and the supply of parts to that industry has been a success story in the region's economy in the last 30 years. Subsequent attempts to bring large-scale modern manufacturing to the region have proved unsuccessful. In the 1990's there was an attempt to establish microchip production in County Durham and on North Tyneside. Although heralded as the future, both operations were financed by foreign capital and proved vulnerable to global economic forces with production swiftly ceasing and moving to cheaper sites within a matter of years in what can be seen as a classic example of "capital flight" despite both operations receiving substantial aid and "sweeteners" from national government. A similar story has been that of call centre operations which were established in the in many parts of the region. In the late 90's and early part of the 21st century these were thought to be the solution to the region's unemployment problems as they had the capacity to retrain and employ many semiskilled and unskilled workers which industry no longer required. However many of these jobs which came to the region due to low wage levels and attractive incentives put forward by local government and regional bodies relocated "offshore" once it proved economically advantageous to do so.

I recently spoke to a research participant who works within local government in the region. He spoke of a "big employer mentality", or how the region has conducted business and governance over the last 150 years has always included large employers. Why? They were there at the start of the region's industrial development and it is difficult to imagine life without them. Also, imagining this involves a radical change of mindset. Instead, those involved with economic development within the region have, and still prefer to hunt, for the next large employer. The latest example of this is Hitachi who intend to manufacture railway rolling stock at Shildon in County Durham (Shildon was historically a centre of rolling stock manufacture until the 1980's). The question that this begs is whether Hitachi will go the same way as microchip manufacture and the call centres? As well as the problems which stem from national government and its failure to understand the dynamics of place, the region also has problems which arise from its failure to update and change its culture of governance. A culture still based upon an alliance of Labourist politics and the interests of big business which coalesce around a much modified but still discernible vision of "modernisation":

"Governance is seen as a set of diverse practices that people are constantly creating and recreating through their concrete activity. Governance is explained by the narratives that the relevant actors first inherit as historical traditions and then revise in response to dilemmas." (Bevir 2013:13)

Governance directed at the national level presently fails because of its disconnection with local and regional narratives, whereas other agents of governance attempt to re-interpret and repair these disconnections or mitigate their effects within the region. A prime example has been the implementation and impact of the withdrawal of the "spare room subsidy" more commonly known as the "bedroom tax" from social housing within the region.

In the North-East 68.5% of residents live in social housing. In April 2013 the implementation of the “Bedroom Tax” affected around 660,000 working age social housing tenants in the UK, and reduced weekly incomes by £12–£22. (Moffatt et al 2015) see also Beatty and Fothergill 2013). This devastating impact stemmed from an ignorance of the North East’s housing stock, whilst the policy aims to encourage social housing tenants to move to smaller properties i.e. a single person is incentivised to move to one person flat if they are living in a larger property, but such properties are scarce.

The North East developed its social housing in order to serve the need of traditional industries. Consequently the vast majority were three bedroom family homes, there were never enough homes for single residents, all the bedroom tax has done is increase demand for a resource which was already in short supply whilst penalising individuals for utilising the resources available. Ironically, if the region had chosen to accept devolved regional government it might have had some chance of mitigating the effects of the bedroom tax as Scotland has done with the Holyrood government, choosing to absorb the cost of the bedroom tax rather than collect it from tenants. Social policies such as this stem from at best a fundamental misunderstanding of place and at worst a total disregard of the potential impact of policies conceived in London and on a national scale upon the region.

“Getting things done.....?”

The North East has been the recipient of many initiatives to combat both economic and social problems. In 2009, County Durham and Darlington Primary Care Trust in the North East of England, commissioned a pilot ‘health first’ case management service for people in the long-term receipt of ill health related out of work benefits. This pilot programme used telephone and face-to-face case management programmes to identify and address individual health needs (and any other related barriers to employment, such as debt or housing). The scheme was intended to complement mainstream services, with case managers signposting the patients to the NHS, Jobcentre Plus and other health and welfare services. Service users could be referred to these services during their time with the case management service or at exit. Case managers coordinated and facilitated access to appropriated services having assessed the service users’ needs with them. The service provider also referred patients to physiotherapy and counselling services which they provided as part of the case management service. Service users were referred into the programme by NHS services; other community services (such as the Community Alcohol Service), their GPs or they could self-refer. The length of engagement with the service varied according to the needs of each service user (6 months was average anticipated length of the engagement). Service users were discharged when they were assessed by their case worker to be ready to enter mainstream services such as the then Pathways to Work programme, vocational services or community health services. This would be based upon an assessment that the service user had improved labour market readiness due to either improved health or the successful implementation of improved support arrangements for individuals with chronic conditions.

The scheme had some success with those who engaged with it, both in terms of improved health and cost effectiveness. This had been documented extensively Warren et al (2014 c) Warren et al (2014 d), Warren et al (2013 a) Warren et al (2013 b). The service however encountered major problems with engaging people to take part in the pilot scheme. In the first two years of the pilot case management service (September 2009 to August 2011) there were 235 service users. Eventually when the

project ended in May 2012 around 450 had engaged with the service. This was far less than had originally been envisaged.

So why did this occur? It was due to a number of factors. The first was largely a matter of governance. At the time NHS Primary Care Trusts (PCTs) had responsibility for overseeing all NHS care which occurred outside of hospitals (Secondary Care) and also public health. Often PCTs provided services directly and also commissioned third parties in the private and voluntary sector to do so. These arrangements changed dramatically after the 2012 NHS Reform Act, with responsibility for public health being returned to local authorities after a 40 year absence.

An earlier small scale case management service aimed at improving the health of the same population had been run successfully by the PCT in conjunction with a local community project between 2007 and 2008. But by 2009 the only way funds could be accessed to deliver a service of this type was if the PCT commissioned a third party organisation to deliver it for them. This it duly did, it commissioned a third party provider from outside of the region to deliver the service.

What it failed to realise was that this was problematic due to the nature of the communities it was trying to access. The communities of the former Durham coalfield are insular to say the least. This was the first mistake. The second was that it attempted to deliver the service with staff from outside of the local area that had very little understanding of it. Thirdly, it attempted to deliver the service after initial contact via the telephone rather than on a face to face basis. Fourthly, it assumed that local GPs would refer potential service users to it and supply the bulk of the referrals, this was not the case. Finally, the service began as Employment Support Allowance (ESA) was being rolled out with the first Work Capability Assessments (WCA) taking place, consequently anyone who was approaching long term Incapacity benefit recipients was viewed with suspicion and scepticism. It cannot of course be proved that a local service provider with a good knowledge of the area, stronger networks and using staff from the local area would have been more successful. However, it can be argued that such an approach which showed a significantly better appreciation of the place and its biography would have engaged with more individuals and that this intervention was effectively hamstrung by reforms and policy priorities at a national level, which broadly sought similar outcomes, such as health improvement and a return to the labour market. It must also be stressed that policies such as this do nothing to increase the demand for labour which remains at the heart of the region's structural economic problems.

Concluding Comments

This article has reflected upon the importance of place in understanding how social policies are interpreted, enforced, applied, and adapted. It has outlined the idea of "biographies of place" and argued that social policy needs to appreciate study and understand these if policy is to have any chance of being effective. This article has also attempted to think about how a particular form of governance which developed in the region based upon an alliance between Labourism and big business around a mutual agenda of "modernisation". For several decades this agenda attempted to serve both the aspirations of both groups and address the region's long term economic decline. However it can also be argued that it also hampered the search for long term solutions to the regions issues.

This alliance broadly held together throughout the Thatcher years despite the national government's desire to abandon the type of large scale economic planning that the "modernisation" agenda required. Over time, the modernisation project changed subtly and became more about retaining and transforming industry rather than its expansion, consequently it was revived during the years of the New Labour administrations. The return of a majority Conservative government and the economic pressures brought about by globalisation, recession and now the uncertainty brought about by the UK intention to leave the European Union have again made this project look unsustainable.

Bevir's broad definition allows a myriad of practices, traditions and habits to contribute to idea of governance. This article has attempted to visualise governance a chain which may begin in Whitehall but as it gets longer as it moves outward toward the citizen it is tempered, transformed to a degree, broken and remade. Whilst regional and local practices are able to modify this chain they cannot make it into something qualitatively different to what it originally was. Thus governance can be seen as a complex process, and interaction between structures and actors with differing priorities. Governance can also be argued to be the outcome of these processes, the point where social policy meets service user. If this is the case then governance can be said to be highly de-centred. For example, research into the recent implementation welfare reforms in the UK suggests that being subjected to sanctions by the department of work and pensions (i.e. having money stopped due to a transgression of the rules) is a highly subjective process with huge variations in application depending on the location of the Job Centre and the particular adviser the individual sees. This would superficially appear to support the idea of street level bureaucracies and bureaucrats put forward by Lipsky (1979) as a way of understanding the enforcement or mitigation of social policy. But such an explanation ultimately fails to explain how those particular policies came into being in the first place. Governance can be argued to be at its most visible when applied by an individual within a particular set of local circumstances. But those same circumstances are part of a political culture. A culture which can resist but not wholly suppress a central social policy agenda which may well be unsuitable and insensitive to its needs.

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